

# **University Museums and Collections Journal**

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### **Editors**

Nathalie Nyst

Réseau des Musées de l'ULB

Université Libre de Bruxelles – CP 175

Avenue F.D. Roosevelt, 50

1050 Brussels

Belgium

Peter Stanbury

Australian Society of Anaesthetists

Suite 603, Eastpoint Tower

180 Ocean Street

Edgecliff, NSW 2027

Australia

Cornelia Weber

Humboldt University of Berlin

Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik

Unter den Linden 6

10099 Berlin

Germany

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## **Encountering Limits: The University Museum**

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Wu Tsai-yen, *Three Friends in Winter* (1953), Finger painting in Chinese ink and colours; 97 x 33.5 cm, gift of Malcolm MacDonald. NUS Museum S1955-0106-001-0

Wu Tsai Yen (1911–2001) was born in China's Fujian province, on the cusp of the birth of Republican China. His artistic formation coincided with the zeitgeist of cultural modernization within China, and the artist had studied finger painting under Pan Tianshou at the modern Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts in Shanghai. Brightly coloured pigments, natural and botanical motifs remained a key feature of Wu's finger-painted art throughout his life.

In 1938, Wu arrived in Singapore, where he was to settle for the rest of his life. Under the patronage of the magnate Loke Wan Tho, Wu rose to prominence in the local artistic circles. Through Loke, Wu became acquainted with Malcolm MacDonald, the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia based in Malaya (1948–1954), and made many gifts of his paintings to the Commissioner-General. When MacDonald left Malaya in 1955, he donated his personal collection of artworks acquired during his tenure to the University of Malaya Art Museum, based in Singapore.

The featured painting *Three Friends of Winter* (Pine, Bamboo and Plum Blossoms) is one of Wu's paintings for MacDonald, which came into the University of Malaya's collection (today the collection of the NUS Museum). While the motif of the pine, bamboo and plum blossoms symbolize steadfastness and resilience (and is used often as a designation of the characteristics of the motifs' recipients), Wu had also cleverly played on the theme of winter and the appearance of the plants to turn the motif into a Christmas greeting to MacDonald (indicated by the colophon): the pine tree here takes the place of the pine of Noel, the plum blossoms and the bamboo leaves a visual play of the holly and the ivy.

Chang Yueh Siang

Curator

Lee Kong Chian Collection of Chinese Art, NUS Museum, Singapore

# Table of Contents

## Panel sessions

The first survey of university museums in Thailand YINGYOD LAPWONG	1
Refusing to stand still, reaching out to the public: The Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong's current public outreach efforts and its possible future directions CHAN LAI-PIK	17
The University of Amsterdam HeritageLab (ErfgoedLab). A learning space STEPH SCHOLTEN	25
Spaces of BLISS. BLISS Market project and/at the University of the Philippines Vargas Museum LOUISE ANNE D. MARCELINO	29
Australia's first university sporting museum: a case study DEIDRE ANDERSON, LAURA GIBERSON, ANDREW SIMPSON & ASHLEIGH THOMSON	35
From the geophysical-meteorological Observatory of Modena to the Italian network of observatories ELENA CORRADINI	45
Museum literacy that is virtually engaging ANDREW SIMPSON, GINA HAMMOND & JAYE MCKENZIE-CLARK	59

## Short communications

University museums in Sri Lanka SURATISSA M. DISSANAYAKE & DAYAWANSA P. NIHAL	67
The university museum: respecting old values, embracing new directions DOMINICK VERSCHELDE	69
Unlocking the value of practical learning: A museum conservation perspective at the National University of Singapore Museum LAWRENCE CHIN, MICHELLE KUEK & CLAIRE LIM	75